Approaching Perfection

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RASHI

[1] And the life of Sarah was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years. The word "year" was written with each separate sum — to tell you that each one must be expounded individually. At the age of a hundred, she was as one of twenty with respect to sin — just as at twenty, she was without sin; for she was not liable for punishment, so, too, when she was a hundred, she was without sin. And at the age of twenty, she was as beautiful as at seven. The years of Sarah's life. They were all equally good.

HAZAL

[1] At the age of a hundred she was as one of twenty. And the life of Sarah was a hundred years. "The Lord knows the days of the unblemished (יֵשׁוֹבֵעַ), and their inheritance will be forever" (Teh. 37:18). Just as they are unblemished, so their years are unblemished. At the age of twenty, she was as beautiful as at seven. At the age of a hundred she was as one of twenty with respect to sin.

1. The Midrash understands the word וָשָׁנָה as meaning "years." The word עָשָׁנָה is used like עָשָׁנָה (Shemot 26:34), "coupled, parallel to each other," to indicate that the years are equal to one another (R. David Luria).

5. Sicks Misker L. Shulman

To understand the importance of the meaning of the word וָשָׁנָה let us examine the portion of יִשְׂרָאֵל which deals with Yaakov's travels and difficulties in exile. The entire portion of יִשְׂרָאֵל does not contain any תַּנָּאָה דּוֹרֵי, blank spaces between sections which serve to denote the end of a topic and whose purpose is נְתַנְתָּא דּוֹרֵי, to allow contemplation between sections about what one previously learned.

6. To understand the reason for the way in which יִשְׂרָאֵל is written, let us examine a Midrash which interprets the prophet's words as a criticism of our father Yaakov.

Yaakov was criticized for looking at the details and particular events, while ignoring the total picture. If one looks at particulars, one gets a distorted view of how things really are. Yaakov suffers when looking at Yosef's disappearance itself; but it is the beginning of Yosef's monarchy when looked at in context of subsequent events.

This then is the reason that there are no תַּנָּאָה דּוֹרֵי in יִשְׂרָאֵל, because it is the beginning of the history of the children of Israel and so on and not and may not contemplate any part of Israel's history separately. Israel's history, of which יִשְׂרָאֵל is the beginning, can be understood only as a whole, not each event by itself.
This then is the eternal answer to our question concerning God’s justice. Lyov asked, “Who shall tell me that I would find Him… and present my case before Him?” (Lyov 233). To which the Holy One replied, “Where were you when I established the earth?” (Lyov 384).

At the time of creation the entire tapestry of history had already been woven as it says, “He showed Adam each generation and its leaders” (Sanhedrin 38b). One who attempts to understand history frame by frame is doomed to failure. It is only by placing events in their universal context that one can truly perceive God’s handiwork.

This was the greatness of Nachum Ish Gamzu. His response to the events that occurred to him was not merely a demonstration of simple faith, but rather a perspective of events in their overall context. While each event in its own is bad, ‘this too’ would add up to a benevolent total, which in fact it did. He was able to view God’s deeds with the approach of Torah. God’s judgments are true, they (His deeds) are righteous when taken all together (Tehillim 19:10).
In our Midrashic literature—and Rashi quotes this—we are informed that Abraham was "tafel" or subordinate to Sarah in prophecy. The "Nitzivi", in his commentary on the Torah, suggests that what our teachers meant was that while Abraham was certainly the prophet par excellence, and Sarah could hardly compare with him in that area, in the domain of "Ruah Hakodesh" Sarah excelled. This requires some explanation.

Prophecy, by definition, relates to the future; and prophecy awaits upon Divine communication. Maimonides insists that while moral, ethical and intellectual perfection are required for prophecy, given these perfections one still depends upon the will of G-d for the exercise of prophetic wisdom. On the other hand, "Ruah Hakodesh" is related to the present. It implies a special sensitivity to the present, a special understanding of events which occur. This sensitivity does not necessarily require Divine communication. A person dedicated to G-d, behaving with kindness and imbedded with a consciousness of G-d, sees in life the unfolding of G-d's will and interprets existence in Divine terms.

Notwithstanding, we are informed by the Talmud that "Sarah, mother of the world" lived 127 years. Rather, Rashi says, it is to be understood in a qualitative sense. "They [all her years, at seven, at twenty, at a hundred] were equally good," kulan shavim l'Iovah. What kind of person was this regal woman, and what constituted the uniqueness of her personality?

Rashi is suggesting that the three divisions of life—childhood, youth, and adulthood—need not be mutually exclusive. One can retain the positive strengths of past stages even as we progress in life. The charismatic covenantal personality—indeed, this is the mark of true greatness—is able to absorb and to experience the qualities of three periods simultaneously.

The child is endowed with a capacity of an all-absorbing faith and trustfulness; youth bursts with zealousness, idealism, and optimism; the adult, mellowed with years, has the benefit of accumulated knowledge and dispassionate judgment. Each age is physically and psychologically attuned to particular emphases, but the superior individual can retain and harmonize the positive strengths of all three periods during his entire lifetime.

Sarah was such a person, "the goodness of her life was equally distributed," kulan shavim l'Iovah. She was at the same time a child in her total faith, youthful in her exuberant idealism and an adult in the maturity of her judgment. This was the tribute Abraham bestowed on Sarah.
Sforno explains that even though there are blemishes that actually increase the strength and value of an animal, they nevertheless render the animal unfit for sacrifice. Throughout the Torah we find completion and wholeness taking precedence over quantity. Thus a whole roll takes precedence over a much larger portion of a loaf of bread, in the recitation of hamotzi.

From this we learn that our avodah is measured not by quantity, but by how close it comes to perfection. Since Hashem is the ultimate perfection, our goal must be to also achieve the greatest measure of perfection possible for a human being, for we are exhorted to emulate Him and “to be complete with Hashem.” Only by being as close to perfect as possible can we hope to have a relationship with Hashem.

The Kohen is Hashem’s representative and the one most directly involved in His most exalted service. He must reflect sheleimus, perfection, and therefore physical imperfections render a Kohen unfit for service in the Sanctuary.

Chazal tell us (Berachos 5b) that whether one does more or less is insignificant. What one actually accomplishes in this world is in the hands of Hashem. The main consideration is that one direct and concentrate his heart towards heaven. What we can control is the intensity of our desire and purity of our effort in the quest for perfection.

The attribute of emes is personified by Yaakov. For this reason Satan chose to wrestle with Yaakov and not with Yitzchak or Avraham. Avraham personified chesed (kindness) and Yitzchak personified avodah (service to Hashem). Satan knew that as long as emes was not firmly established in the world, he could live with chesed and avodah. Without emes, chesed can be distorted into sexual immorality and avodah into idolatry. Once emes is firmly established, however, then chesed is true chesed and avodah is true avodah. The Telzer Rosh HaYeshivah, Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Katz, zt”l, explained the words of Chazal, “The study of Torah is equal [literally opposite] all of them,” as follows: To be sure that our mitzvos are truly mitzvos, they must be placed opposite Torah learning, i.e., appraised in light of the emes of Torah, lest they be corrupted into distortions of chesed or avodah.

We live in the period of ikvusa d’meshichah, the last stage of exile, about which Chazal say, “Truth will be missing.” The Yerushalmi says that when people lie, nature follows suit. Clouds form, and it appears that rain will fall, but no rain falls. Today a person can arise in the morning and dress in imitation cotton clothing, put on imitation leather shoes, sit on an imitation wooden chair, eat a breakfast of imitation egg with imitation meat, salted with a salt substitute and washed down with fruit juice that contains no fruit.

We live in a period where truth is lacking — hence the proliferation of synthetics and imitation, even in nature itself.

R’ Yitzchak said: “The Torah teaches us that when a person does a mitzvah, he should do so with a complete and happy heart. Had Reuven known that the Torah would record that he attempted to save Yosef from his brothers, he would have put him on his shoulders and run with him home. And if Aharon had known that the Torah would record that he would be happy when he met Moshe Rabbeinu after [Moshe] was chosen to be the Redeemer, he would have come with drums and cymbals. And if Boaz had known that the Megillah would record that he gave Ruth some parched grain to eat, he would have given her a royal banquet” (Yalkut Shimoni Rus 604).

In each instance cited by the Midrash, there was doubt as to what the proper conduct really was. Reuven was unsure if saving Yosef was proper after the brothers judged him a threat to their existence. If Moshe questioned his own suitability to be the Redeemer, Aharon likewise had the right to have reservations concerning his brother’s appointment. And similarly, Boaz had grounds for doubts about the convert Ruth, not knowing her sincerity and character.

Hence they acted without the complete and happy heart that could have made their mitzvos perfect, and this blemish was reflected in the outcome of their actions. Yosef was sold into slavery; the mission to Pharaoh met with initial failure (see Haamek Davar, Shemos 3:18); and David’s lineage was impugned.

Rabbi Elazar Ha-Kapar says, “Envy, lust and desire for honor drive a man out of the world.”
As long as Sarah was alive, notes Rashi, a lamp was lit from one Sabbath eve to the next; the benediction was made over the dough (which she kneaded); and a cloud hovered over the tent. When she died this all ceased, but when Rivkah came everything began once again.

These three hallmarks of Sarah’s tent correspond to the three main duties of the Jewish wife: to light Sabbath lights (נ.gridy), to separate kallah from the dough, which assures a blessing from above (ג.m), and to observe the laws of purity of conjugal life (ח.m). They draw the presence and protection of the Divine Majesty which hovers invisibly over the home as in a column of “cloud over the tent.”

The Talmud teaches that two ministering angels—one good and one evil—escort a person home from the synagogue on the eve of the Sabbath. If a Jew arrives home and finds a kindled lamp, a set table, and a made bed, the good angel says, “May it be [God’s] will that it also be so next Sabbath.” The evil angel is compelled to answer, “Amen.” But if not—then the evil angel says, “May it be [God’s] will that it also be so next Sabbath.” The good angel is compelled to answer, “Amen” (Shabbos 119b).